The Black Rose

And from the depth where the cold wind blows
A single petal begins to grow
A bloom of ink
A dark black rose
For the tragic, only silence knows

Halah Fatmi

THE BLACK ROSE

A lyrical novelette in verse, about coercive control, and surviving a staged proposal in three feet of mud.
The story of how a hollow reed learned she was full of storm.

"I believe your pain is real'— so a boy, two years older, offers his shoulder, she thinks it's salvation.

She is not weak. She is a girl who was thrown overboard long before the boat—and learnt, how to become a mother to her own pain.

____Halah Fatmi____

THE BLACK ROSE

~ Halah Fatmi

I.THE RUST AND THE SILK

My forehead was bleeding, reeking of iron and rain as it traced down the cold curve of my cheek, slipping into the corner of my lips with a taste like old bronze coins. That was the exact second of absolute clarity — I do not belong here. This is not my place. I am replaced, discarded like fine lace the bride no longer feels comfortable wearing.

Unlike the vibrant heart I once held at sixteen, what I have today is a forever bruised heart. It carries a jagged scar that refuses to erase its mark. It pulses when it rains.

"A rose is synced with love only when it is bleeding red," a voice told me once from my doorway.

I never saw her face back then. Only silk. Only the smell of wine that looked like arterial spray.

"Not when its black petals are wilting, begging to be loved. But Sedna, look at you. You're ugly. You're a glitch in the design. You're not worthy of love."

I was sixteen when I met him, and I was still a girl who believed pain had to be earned. Before him, my life was already a fractured before and after. The before was loud — school corridors smelling of chalk, wet umbrellas, and me hovering around the grand piano in the auditorium, pressing down on keys until my fingertips throbbed. The after was quiet. It started three months after my 10th board exams.

I woke up one Tuesday morning, and my body felt as though it had been filled with wet sand overnight. My shoulders ached with a dull, marrow-deep burn. My knees felt bruised from the inside out, as if someone had hammered iron pegs into the joints while I slept. A headache sat behind my eyes like a low bulb that never switched off, humming at a frequency only I could hear.

Fibromyalgia. A musculoskeletal cage, invisible to everyone except the person living inside it.

It turned me into a ghost in my own youth. Friends were scared to sit near me, afraid that a gentle bump would trigger a gasp of pain. Teachers thought I was making excuses to skip physical education. My father, unable to handle a daughter whose brokenness had no X-ray proof, decided the smile was the truth and the tears at night were the lie.

Then he came. Two years older, in college, with a smile that felt like someone finally turning on the light in a dark room.

"You're not weak," he told me at the tea stall behind the school back then. "You're just tuned differently. Like a rare instrument that standard musicians don't know how to play."

No one had ever made my sickness sound beautiful. He started calling me his Brave Girl. And yet, years later, my forehead still bled where he had thrown me.

Through the sight of healthy onlookers,

This life was viewed as a site of blessing

Straight from the almighty of the heavens.

They thought a corpse which should decay in thin air

Was being bestowed with the greatest gift

Simply because it could still breathe the same air as the living.

But it took no time at all for the greatest gift

To turn into the harshest reality.

Only the breathing corpses could define

How much more painful death is than actually being dead.

How painful is death when you are not dead?

Only death knows how tormenting it can be.

Only the living dead of death can feel it.

He was kind. That is what I need you to understand first. If he had been cruel from the start, I would have left. I was sick, not stupid.

The falling in love was not a sudden plunge; it was a slow, deliberate drowning disguised as salvation. He came to the library every single day during the monsoon of my seventeenth year. I was sitting on the cold linoleum floor between the dust-covered shelves of Russian literature because standing made the small of my back feel like it was collapsing. He didn't offer a pitying hand to pull me up. Instead, he slid down the wooden paneling, sat right beside me in his crisp blue shirt, and whispered:

"Are you hiding or resting?"

"Resting," **I whispered back, my voice barely carrying over the patter of rain against the high arched windows.**

"Good place for it," **he said, opening a heavy hardcover on modern architecture.** ***"Mind if I rest too?"***

For three weeks, that was all we were: two shadows sharing space between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Then came the gestures that stripped away my defenses.

He learned the exact schedule of my flares. He brought me steaming plastic cups of sweet ginger tea, knowing that heat calmed the tremors in my fingers. He brought handwritten notes on music theory, knowing I missed my piano practice when the pain forced me to stay home.

When the worst flare of my teenage years struck — an eleven-day siege where I couldn't lift a glass of water, where my muscles vibrated like plucked copper strings, and my skin hurt so much that even my softest cotton nightgown felt like hot wool — he did not run away.

He came to my window. He sat on the floor beside my bed, ignoring my father's uncomfortable coughs from the hallway. He read to me. Rumi. Keats. He made me read my own terrible, aching poems aloud.

"Let the world have their cheap scale to measure beauty," he told me, his thumb tracing the bone of my wrist while I was shaking from fatigue. "I know what true treasure is. They look at you and see illness. I look at you and see a masterpiece written in a language they haven't learned to read."

I told him my secret theory on a Tuesday evening when the sky was the color of a fresh bruise: Life is like a piano. The white keys are the good days, the laughter, the sunshine. The black keys are the pain, the fatigue, the dark nights. You need both to make a complete melody.

He loved that. He leaned down, his breath warm against my temple, kissed my forehead, and said, "You have a writer's mind, Sedna. A composer's soul. Don't let anyone tell you sensitivity is weakness."

For six months, he was perfect. Patient. Gentle. My first love. I gave him the keys to every room in my mind. I showed him where the pain lived, where the fear stayed, and where my pride was hidden.

I did not see when the saving turned into studying. I did not realize that while I was falling in love, he was taking notes.

Romance with him was an immersive theater where I was the sole spectator and he

was the master director.

He knew how to weave magic out of my limitations. When I couldn't walk to the park, he brought the park to my room — pressing wild yellow wildflowers between the pages of my music books. When my hands were too swollen to hold a pen, he held his hand over mine, guiding the ink across the page so I could still write.

"We are a team, Sedna,"* he would whisper, pressing his lips to the crown of my head while we lay on his rug, watching the dusk settle over the city. *"You provide the depth, I provide the strength."

He courted my vulnerability. He begged me to describe the exact quality of my pain.

• "Is it sharp today, my love?"

• "Is it a dull hum or a striking iron?"

• "Where does the fire sit right now?"

I thought this was intimacy beyond measure. I thought I had found a man who looked into the abyss of my chronic illness and chose to build a home there. I poured my soul into his lap. I told him how my father looked at me with disappointment; how my former friends had stopped inviting me to parties because I was "too fragile"; how my deepest, darkest terror was being discarded by the world for being defective.

He drank every word like wine.

"I will never discard you," he promised, his eyes dark and wide under the yellow streetlamps. "You are my rare instrument. Standard men would break you. I am the only one who knows how to handle your sound."

The shift was so gradual that by the time the cage closed, I had already helped him forge the bars.

It started with small, soft corrections disguised as protective love:

• "You slept again all afternoon, Sedna? You're letting the illness win, love. I thought you were stronger than that."

• "You shouldn't play piano today, your hands look swollen. Rest. I know your body better than you do."

• "If you really wanted to get better, you'd try harder. You like being comfortable in your suffering."

The title he gave me — My Brave Girl — turned from a badge of honor into an impossible exam I had to pass every single morning. If I cried, I was failing. If I

complained, I was losing his respect. If I wanted to go out when he decided I was too sick, I was being rebellious and ungrateful.

Slowly, my world shrank. He subtly convinced my mother that visitors exhausted me. He told my few remaining acquaintances that I was in too much pain for phone calls. He curated my isolation until he was the only lens through which I viewed my own existence.

The discovery did not happen in a dramatic storm; it happened on a warm Thursday afternoon in early autumn.

He had gone to the bathroom, leaving his leather satchel unzipped on his study table. A heavy black notebook slipped out onto the rug. I picked it up, assuming it contained his college lecture notes or perhaps the lyrics to a song he was writing for me.

I opened it.

The handwriting was unmistakably his — precise, elegant, slanted to the right. But the content was not poetry. It was a cold, clinical ledger. An inventory of my ruin.

Plaintext

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SUBJECT: SEDNA - OBSERVED BEHAVIOR & SENSITIVITY TRACKING

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[OCTOBER 12]

Cried in front of my college friends when her shoulder spasmed.

Embarrassing. Claimed her pain scale was 8/10. Highly attention-seeking.

Needs to be reminded of her burden status.

[OCTOBER 14]

Refused to come down for dinner with my cousins. Claimed a flare.

Lazy. Manipulative use of symptoms to avoid social obligations.

Punished with 24 hours of cold distance. (Result: She apologized by midnight).

[OCTOBER 19]

Played piano for 20 minutes after explicitly told to rest at 10 minutes.

Disobedient. Wants to remain in pain so she can play the tragic artist.

Reminded her that her music is mediocre without my guidance.

[NOVEMBER 04]

Showed extreme emotional dependency today. Cried when I left for two hours.

Good. The isolation protocol is working. She believes no one else will accept the illness.

My hands shook violently. The pages rattled like dry leaves. I flipped to the very back of the notebook, where a single paragraph was underlined twice:

"The black keys are all she is. Without my hand upon the board, she is only noise. She does not own her tragedy; I curate it. A broken girl is the easiest canvas to paint."

When he walked back into the room, wiping his hands on a hand towel, he didn't rush to snatch the book. He stopped. He looked at me, his expression shifting from casual ease to a smooth, chilling calm that horrified me more than rage ever could.

He smiled — a slow, oily curl of the lip.

"Finally,"* he said softly, walking over and taking the notebook from my paralyzed fingers. *"You found it. I was wondering when you'd be brave enough to look."

"What is this?"* My voice was a whisper, shredded by terror. *"What is this, Julian?"

"It's the truth, Sedna," he replied, sitting across from me and tucking the notebook back into his bag with methodical care. "It's an inventory. Someone has to keep track, because you lie to yourself every day. You think you are this tragic, poetic sick girl enduring a noble trial. You aren't. You're a spoiled, lazy girl who is comfortable being sick because it guarantees attention."

"I loved you!"* I gasped, tears finally spilling over my lashes. *"I trusted you with my body! With my pain!"

He leaned forward, using one finger to gently hook under my chin, lifting my face toward his. His touch was as light as featherwork, yet it felt like a brand.

"Don't cry, my Brave Girl," he murmured, his eyes glittering with a horrifying, detached affection. "This is love. Real love isn't blind praise. Real love is honest. I see you completely, Sedna. I see the sickness, the ugly dependency, the dramatic performance — and I'm still here. Who else would ever stay with an inventory like this?"

And because I was seventeen, sick, and convinced that my broken body was a sentence of lifelong solitude, I swallowed the poison. I allowed myself to believe that honesty was supposed to feel like a blade in the ribs.

The physical abuse began in small, invisible increments during the winter that followed.

He was smart. He knew my medical history better than my doctors did. He knew where the fibromyalgia tender points were located — the eighteen specific spots on the body that ignite with excruciating fire when pressed.

During my flares, when I was too weak to stand, he would sit on the edge of my mattress under the pretense of soothing me.

***"You look so beautiful when you're helpless,"* he whispered one evening, his voice dripping with dark romance.**

He didn't hit me. He didn't leave bruises that could be shown to a judge. Instead, he would take his thumb and press it directly into the soft tissue right behind my collarbone — the exact nerve junction that made my entire left arm go numb with burning agony.

I would gasp, my back arching off the bed, tears streaming into my hair.

"See?" he would whisper, leaning down until his lips brushed my ear. "This is what happens when you don't listen to me. This is what happens when you speak back to me in front of my friends."

Then came the second voice.

It started as a subtle presence in his apartment — the lingering scent of expensive damask rose perfume that was not mine; a stray thread of emerald silk caught in his sofa cushions; a second glass of wine sitting in the sink, stained with dark crimson lipstick.

Whenever I asked, he would laugh and call me paranoid, attributing my questions to "brain fog" caused by my illness.

"Your mind is playing tricks on you again, Sedna," he would say, stroking my hair while my body trembled. "You're getting so confused lately. It's the medicine. You really need to rely on me more."

But one night, while I lay in his guest room during a severe pain storm, unable to move my legs, I heard them in the hallway.

A woman's laugh — sharp, aristocratic, laced with absolute disdain.

"Why do you keep her around?" the voice asked. It was smooth, rich, like liquid silk. "She looks like a corpse. She smells like liniment and damp wool."

"She has her uses," his voice replied, low and amused. "She's an audience. And besides, her family's estate is the key to the foundation loan. A few more months of playing the devoted boyfriend, and her father will sign anything I put in front of him."

"You're sick,"* she laughed, though there was no disgust in her tone — only an echoing, sadistic delight. *"She actually thinks you love her."

"She thinks I'm her savior," he whispered. "The well is where the forgotten things must go, my sweet. And Sedna is already halfway down."

I lay on that bed, frozen in my musculoskeletal cage, staring at the dark ceiling. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tear the walls down. But my body refused to obey. I was trapped inside a physical vault while two monsters negotiated the price of my soul in the corridor outside.

YOU ARE NOTHING BUT THE PAIN YOU KNOW

We moved as pawns upon an endless floor,

An anniversary behind a heavy door.

A slim ring set with diamond fire,

While cold cranes sang a holy choir.

Behind closed doors, the public frame would fade,

And a private inventory of ruin was made.

He rained down thorns upon my head,

And left me broken by the bed.

He enjoyed my tears; he fed on the way

I shuddered when he entered to strip the day.

Every physical strike, every calculated word

Intended to diminish the voice unheard,

Was part of his performance.

I was his puppet, his spare,

Deemed divine only when he needed a prop in the air.

He would trace my features, soft and slow,

With lips of grace that tasted of rot below,

All while planning the exact rhythm of the next blow.

The culmination of his physical cruelty happened two nights before the boat.

We were in his study. I had found a set of bank documents in his drawer — papers where he had forged my father's signature on a loan guarantee. When I confronted him, holding the trembling papers in my hand, his face lost all traces of the kind boy from the library.

***"Give me those,"* he said, his voice flat.**

"No!" I screamed, the first real act of defiance in two years. "You used me! You never loved me! You used my sickness to isolate me from my father so you could steal from him!"

"I made you!" he roared, stepping toward me. "You were a miserable, limping ghost sitting on a library floor! I turned you into poetry! I gave your worthless, painful existence a purpose!"

"Don't call me that!" I sobbed. "Don't call me your Brave Girl!"

He lunged. He didn't punch me; he grabbed my hair and slammed me backward. My head struck the sharp wooden edge of his mahogany desk.

A sickening *crack* echoed through the room.

Warmth instantly flooded down my face. My forehead was split open. The scent of copper, iron, and rain filled my nostrils as the blood slipped down the curve of my cheek, pooling at the corner of my mouth.

I fell to the rug, gasping, clutching my head as darkness encroached at the edges of my vision.

And then — the horrifying ritual returned.

He did not panic. He did not call an ambulance. He went to the bathroom, wrung out a washcloth with warm water, knelt beside my bleeding form, and gently, tenderly wiped the crimson stain from my eyes.

"Look what you made me do," he whispered, his thumbs softly brushing over the

spots on my face that hurt. "You make me ruin beautiful things, Sedna. Why do you push me? Why do you force me to be harsh?"

I lay there, bleeding, weeping, utterly shattered.

He left me on that floor.

Brick by heavy brick the wall went down,

The self-worth broken in a silent town.

His love became a gilded, boring worm,

That held the softest tissues of my mind firm.

He sat me down beneath the naked light,

To turn the morning into heavy night,

And read my failures like a sacred text,

To dictate what the shadow wanted next.

Then through the door the second shadow came,

Draped in her silk to amplify the shame.

A mirror image in the stained-glass view,

To feast upon the wreckage that he knew.

Their laughter cut like glass across the floor,

An elegant venom at the parlor door.

She cooed to see the heavy crimson trace,

And touched the jawline of his smiling face.

"A rose is only beautiful," she said,

"When it is torn apart and bleeding red."

"Why do you keep her here?" she softly asked,

While in the crystal glass the vintage basked.

A crimson red like fresh arterial spray,

To wash the remnants of the dawn away.

"She is a wilted petal on the floor,

A smudge against the beauty of our door.

Surely the vessel has survived the game,

And nothing left remains but hollow shame."

He did not look at where my body lay,

He looked right through me in a clinical way,

As if a windowpane were standing bare,

And he was weighing how to break it there.

She leaned down close, her breath of mint and ice,

To deliver the final text of their advice: "The well is where the forgotten things must go, And you are nothing but the pain you know. three days, I stayed in my bedroom at my father's house, locked away, nursing the split skin on my forehead with ice and butterfly bandages. I swore I would never see him again. I swore I was done.

Then, at 8:47 PM on the third night, my phone rang.

I stared at the screen. His name flashed like a warning light. I shouldn't have answered. But the psychology of abuse is a labyrinth; the abuser constructs the wound and then presents himself as the only salve.

I picked up.

Plaintext

HIM: "Sedna? Are you awake? Please... don't hang up. I haven't slept in three days.

I keep seeing your face. Your forehead. The blood. I was a monster, Sedna.

A absolute monster. I don't know what comes over me."

ME: [Silence. Holding my breath, heart hammering against my ribs.]

HIM: "I'm at the docks. I've booked the boat — the same boat from our first anniversary.

Just us. No phones, no bank papers, no noise. I have something to ask you, Sedna.

Something I should have asked a year ago. Give me one hour. If you don't like

what I ask, you can walk away forever and I will never touch you again. I swear on my life."

There is only one thing a young woman expects when the man who destroyed her calls her to a boat at sunset, talking about a question he should have asked a year ago.

My foolish, battered, sixteen-year-old heart, still buried beneath the trauma, made one final, desperate bid for redemption. I wanted the fairy tale back. I wanted the boy from the library who brought me tea.

I spent an hour in front of the mirror. I used thick concealer and powder to hide the purple bruise and the jagged scab on my forehead. I put on the white lace dress he had bought me for my eighteenth birthday.

I took the ferry down to the private marina, my knees burning with a fresh flare, my heart pounding a terrifying rhythm against my ribs.

The sea was unnaturally calm, flat like a sheet of gray glass beneath a bruised purple sky.

He was standing on the deck of a sleek wooden yacht, wearing a crisp white linen shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his dark hair ruffled by the sea breeze. He looked exactly like the boy I had fallen in love with in the library.

When he saw me limping down the wooden pier, he ran toward me. He took my hands, bowed his head, and kissed my knuckles with intense, desperate fever. Jo *it. He truly regrets it. The nightmare is over.*

Then: **Click. Click. Click.**

The sharp, rhythmic sound of high heels striking the hardwood deck echoed behind him.

I froze.

From the cabin of the yacht walked the woman.

She was stunning in an cruel, flawless way. Tall, wrapped in an emerald silk dress that billowed in the wind, with blood-red lipstick and hair swept back into a severe, elegant chignon. She held two crystal glasses filled with dark red wine.

She smiled at me — not with anger, but with an agonizing, motherly pity. Like looking at a stray dog that had wandered onto a private tennis court.

Plaintext

ME: "What... what is she doing here?"

HIM: [He doesn't answer me. He steps back. Away from me. Toward her.

He smoothly accepts a wine glass from her hand.]

HER: "Oh, sweetie. You actually wore white. You really thought..."

ME: "Julian? What is this?"

HIM: [Looking at her, completely ignoring my existence]

"I told you she would wear white. Didn't I tell you?"

HER: "You were completely right. So predictable."

She walked slowly toward me, reached out, and pulled the velvet box from my paralyzed fingers. She closed it with a sharp, echoing *snap*, and casually dropped it into her designer handbag.

Plaintext

ME: "That... that was for me. He called me. He said he was going to propose!"

HER: "Propose? Oh, honey. No. This ring was fitted for my finger three weeks ago in Paris.

He didn't bring you here to propose. He brought you here because I wanted to see

if you'd actually come if he whistled. If you'd still bleed for him.

And look at you — forehead covered in makeup, dressed like a bride. So brave."

I looked at him, my soul tearing at the seams, silently begging him to stop this nightmare.

"Tell her she's lying!" I screamed, my voice cracking over the water. "You called me at 8:47! You said you were a monster! You said you wanted to fix us!"

Julian took a slow sip of his wine. The warmth in his eyes was gone. The tenderness was gone. What remained was the cold, clinical researcher from the black notebook.

"Sedna, please don't make a scene," he said, his tone flat, exhausted, and deeply bored. "You knew this was over months ago. You just don't know how to exit a room. You're a hollow reed, remember? Without my hand upon your board, you gather dust. I had to create a proper finale for you, otherwise you'd keep texting me for tea."

***"Why?"* I sobbed, the tears washing away the thick powder on my forehead, exposing**

the dark purple bruise underneath. *"Why the ring? Why the white dress? Why bring me to the sea?"*

"Because she wanted to see the famous Brave Girl," Julian smiled, leaning back against the brass railing. "Because I wanted to see if the conditioning held. And because, deep down, Sedna... you love a good tragedy. You're performing right now.

And then, amid the suffocating weight of my humiliation, a strange clarity washed over me.

I looked at them as they stood side by side on the deck of the yacht. I looked at the way he held her, and the way she held her wine.

And I saw the dead romance behind the curtain.

They didn't love each other. There was no warmth between them, no tenderness, no soft history. When his arm wrapped around her emerald silk waist, it was not an embrace — it was a display of possession. When she adjusted his collar, her fingers were sharp, verifying her ownership, not offering affection.

Suddenly, she turned her head and snapped at him, her voice dropping its aristocratic polish:

Plaintext

HER: "You said you ended it cleanly last month! You said you wouldn't call her again!

Why did you call her three times on Tuesday?"

HIM: "I told you why! I needed her to bring the signed property releases!

And why did you come on the boat? I told you to wait at the restaurant!

You are so pathetically insecure that you have to watch me dump a sick teenager?"

HER: "Because you get off on it, Julian! You love watching her hope!

You told me she would cry! You wanted me to watch her cry! That is twisted!"

HIM: "And you loved watching it! Don't act innocent! You wore emerald silk

specifically because you knew she owned that cheap white dress!

Without her to compare yourself to, you're just another uninteresting heiress!"

I stood on the deck, watching them tear into each other like two vultures fighting over

a carcass that wasn't even dead yet.

I wasn't the third person in their love story.

I was the foundation of it.

My pain was their foreplay. My humiliation was the currency they used to buy excitement in their hollow, narcissistic relationship. Without my suffering to serve as a backdrop, they had nothing to say to each other. They were two empty mirrors facing one another, reflecting endless, void-like vanity.

"You brought me here to watch me break,"* I said, my voice suddenly dropping its tearful octave, becoming dead and steady. *"That was the whole game. Amplify the shame."

Julian turned back to me, startled by the shift in my tone.

Plaintext

ME: "Was any of it real? The library? The tea? When you said I was an instrument?"

HIM: [He looked at her. Then he looked at me. For the first time in two years,

he stripped away the poetry and spoke with pure, unvarnished sociopathy.]

"No, Sedna. At the start, you were just easy. You were the sick girl in the library

that nobody else was looking at. I knew if I brought you tea for two weeks,

you'd belong to me forever. And you did. You did exactly what I calculated."

ME: "I loved you when I couldn't stand up! I trusted you when my body was a cage!"

HIM: [He walked over to me. He reached out and brushed my damp hair away

from my bleeding forehead with a touch so soft, so agonizingly gentle,

that it hurt more than any blow.]

"I know, my Brave Girl. That's what made you perfect. You loved me so much

you let me do anything to you. And I needed someone who would let me do anything."

Behind him, the woman in silk scoffed loudly, checking her diamond watch.

"Just push her off or let her walk," she said coldly. "The dinner reservation is at nine, and they don't hold tables."

Before I had left my house that night, knowing deep in my gut that something was wrong, I had activated a continuous voice-recording app on my phone, setting it to automatically back up to a secure cloud server.

I reached into my white coat pocket, pulled out my phone, and hit Play on the loudspeaker.

The yacht's high-end speakers were suddenly filled with Julian's clear, crisp voice from three nights ago:

[AUDIO RECORDING PLAYING] "I need her name on the deed first. Her father owns the riverside property. I need her father's guarantee for the bank loan. I'll marry the sick girl, bleed her estate dry, and then we're done. Then you wear the ring, my pearl. She won't survive the divorce anyway; her health is completely shot."

The silence that fell over the boat was deafening.

The woman in silk went deathly pale. She turned to Julian, her eyes wide with fury and horror.

"You said her father had no money!" she shrieked. "You said you were doing this for me!"

Julian's composure finally shattered. His face flushed a dark, ugly purple. He lunged at me, his fingers tearing into my wrist as he ripped the phone from my hand.

"Don't leave a trace, my baby,"* he snarled into my face, his breath reeking of expensive wine. *"Or the well will have you replaced!"

He threw my phone far out into the ocean.

Then, with both hands, he shoved me backward.

He expected me to plunge into sixty feet of dark, swirling ocean water — a dramatic, tragic drowning of the sick girl who couldn't swim against the current.

Instead, my body flew backward off the low deck and landed with a hard, jarring THUD.

I didn't hit deep sea.

I hit three feet of lukewarm water and sticky mud.

The luxury yacht had drifted into a shallow sandbar right near the shore, grounded

by the low tide. The grand, cinematic murder he had staged in his head was clumsy, pathetic, and shallow.

I sat up in the mud.

My white dress was ruined, covered in black silt and sea algae. My forehead was bleeding again where the scab had torn open. My body screamed in agony from the impact, every nerve in my back firing like white-hot needles.

I looked up at the yacht.

Julian and the woman in silk were leaning over the brass railing, looking down at me in the three-foot mud puddle. They didn't look like sophisticated villains anymore. They looked small, messy, and absurd.

And then they started screaming — not at me, but at each other. She was throwing her wine in his face; he was trying to grab her purse; both were cursing as the boat groaned, stuck on the mudbank.

I pulled myself up onto my feet. Knee-deep in silt, cold, bruised, and bleeding, I turned my back on the yacht.

I waded to the shore. I did not look back once.

I cannot count the nights I prayed to fade,

Within the cage my aching bones had made.

A phantom storm across the modern wire,

Where every nerve-line rippled into fire.

He knew the maps of my anatomy,

And where the quiet sickness held its seat,

He focused his malice to make the pain complete.

He built the walls of absolute isolation,

A curated blueprint of deep degradation.

A game of tricks and bitter, hollow treats,

While phantom blood dissolved upon the sheets.

The seven minutes it took to walk from the shallow mudbar to the paved coastal road were the longest seven minutes of my life.

With every step, my body revolted. My fibromyalgia flared with terrifying intensity — my thighs felt as though they were being scorched by open flame, my spinal column throbbed like struck brass, and my breath came in short, gasping rags of air.

Plaintext

MINUTE ONE:

Reaching for his hand on the pier, fully believing in a second chance.

The memory of his voice calling me "ethereal."

MINUTE TWO:

The snap of the velvet box in her purse. The realization that my white dress

was a costume for their audience.

MINUTE THREE:

"You are the hollow reed, Sedna. Without my hand, you gather dust."

MINUTE FOUR:

"A rose is synced with love only when it is bleeding red."

The realization that his tenderness was just sophisticated cruelty.

MINUTE FIVE:

The sound of his voice on the recording: "Bleed her estate dry."

The complete death of the boy from the library.

MINUTE SIX:

The push. The fall. The expectation of deep water and tragic death.

MINUTE SEVEN:

Hitting three feet of mud. Realizing that his grand theater was nothing

more than a pathetic puddle. Cold mud. Merciful cold. Finally, quiet.

I reached my house at midnight.

I did not cry. I did not collapse. The warmth of my former self had burned away, leaving behind a cold, iron core that pain could no longer breach.

I took a hot shower, watching the black mud and dried blood wash down the drain. I bandaged my forehead with precise, mechanical care.

Then, I opened my laptop.

Because my phone had automatically uploaded every audio file, every screenshot of his texts, every ledger entry from his black notebook that I had secretly photographed months ago to my cloud account, I had the entire anatomy of his fraud organized by date and time.

I wrote my own inventory:

• OCT 12: Pressed thumb into nerve junction for 8 seconds to enforce silence.

• NOV 02: Split forehead open against mahogany desk. Claimed "the sea would wash it clean."

• MAY 11: Staged fake proposal on rented yacht. Brought accomplice to amplify emotional torture. Forged father's signature on $150,000 bank loan. Pushed victim into 3-foot sandbar.

I didn't call the police first. I sent the complete, unedited archive — audio files, bank forgery documents, photo logs, and medical records — to a meticulously selected mailing list:

• His university's ethics committee and the Dean of Law.

• The banking board investigating his loan application.

• His mother's personal email address.

• Her parents' high-society charity board.

At 2:14 AM, the front doorbell rang.

I walked down the stairs slowly, my body aching, but my steps steady. I looked through the peephole.

It was Julian.

He was dripping wet from the ocean, his crisp white shirt stained with green algae, his hands shaking violently. He was holding a paper cup from the 24-hour tea stall down the street.

"Sedna!" he called out, his voice cracked, desperate, laced with that old, manipulative

sweetness. "Sedna, please, my Brave Girl, open the door! You completely misunderstood everything on the boat! She meant nothing to me! I brought you tea, Sedna... like before! Like in the library! Please, love, open the door!"

He held up the paper cup to the glass window of the door, his chin trembling.

That was the most devastating moment of my life.

Because a small, broken part of me — the sixteen-year-old girl sitting on the cold library floor, desperate for anyone to tell her she wasn't broken — still wanted to open that door and take that warm cup.

I stood behind the heavy mahogany door, my shadow long beneath the hallway light.

"I don't drink tea anymore, Julian,"* I said, my voice quiet, clear, and utterly devoid of anger. *"It makes me remember how thirsty I was."

They did not go down without a fight. Psychopaths do not surrender; they adapt.

When the financial fraud charges began to circle his family and the university suspended him pending an investigation, they launched a digital warfare campaign designed to turn my reality into a farce.

Her friends created a private group chat and public burner accounts named "The Well."

They leaked cropped screenshots of me standing knee-deep in the mud, my white dress ruined, my hair matted with blood, taken by someone on the dock before I walked away.

Plaintext

[HER POST]: "Just checking in on our favorite charity case! How's the

musculoskeletal cage today? Still performing for attention?"

[HIS COMMENT]: "She really thought the sea would wash it clean.

Some girls will do anything for poetry material."

[GROUP MEME]: A photo of me crying in mud, captioned:

'When the staged proposal gets too real.'

They uploaded short audio clips mimicking my voice, making fun of the way I spoke when my jaw was stiff from pain. They turned my chronic illness, my trauma, and my poetry into a public punchline.

They wanted me to isolate. They wanted me to hide in my room, lock the doors, and fall into the dark well they had dug for me.

They did not understand who they were dealing with.

A girl who lives with daily, physical, inescapable pain cannot be broken by words on a screen. Physical agony clears the mind of superficial fears. Their mockery was loud, but it was shallow — like the three feet of water his boat had stranded upon.

I printed out every tweet, every comment, every meme, and added them to the legal dossier submitted to the magistrate's court for cyber-harassment and aggravated assault.

I did not reply to a single message. I did not block them. I left their accounts unblocked so they could watch me live.

The unraveling was absolute.

In April, the bank confirmed the forgery. Julian's father was forced to liquidate two commercial properties to settle the fraudulent loans his son had taken out in my family's name to avoid public imprisonment.

In May, the university officially expelled Julian, revoking his academic standing three weeks before graduation.

The woman in silk found her family's name dragged through every high-society gossip column in the city. Her parents stripped her of her trust fund oversight and sent her abroad to a quiet village in Europe to avoid the press fallout. Her luxury social media accounts were wiped clean; the ring was never seen again.

I saw him one final time in late autumn.

I was exiting the city library, carrying a satchel of fresh sheet music. He was standing near the bus stop across the street.

He didn't have his tailored jackets or his crisp linen shirts anymore. He looked smaller, thinner, his hair untrimmed, his eyes hollow and nervous. He was holding a plastic folder of job applications.

He caught my eye across the busy street. For a second, his mouth opened — perhaps to say *"Brave Girl,"* perhaps to offer another rehearsed line of tragic poetry.

I didn't stop. I didn't glare. I didn't speed up my stride.

I looked through him as if he were a pane of glass that had long since been shattered and swept away from the pavement.

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Their cathedral of cruelty had been built entirely on my submission. The moment I stood up out of the mud and stopped bleeding for their audience, the roof caved in on top of them.

THRIVING BEYOND THE CAGE

That was two years ago.

Today, the musculoskeletal cage has not vanished. Fibromyalgia does not offer fairytale cures. There are still mornings where I wake up and my limbs feel wrapped in invisible barbed wire, where my knees burn like molten lead, and where getting out of bed requires a hero's ransom of willpower.

But the house no longer breathes with terror.

I took the gift of time that illness forces upon a person and turned it into iron.

My forehead still carries a fine, pale scar right at the hairline. It pulses with a faint, dull throb when the heavy monsoon rains sweep across the city.

But it no longer smells of blood. It smells of salt, iron, rain, and my own unyielding skin.

I am Sedna.

I am the girl who survived the invisible cage. I am the priestess of my own story. I am the hollow reed who learned she was full of the ocean's storm. I am the Queen of Crimson Red.

The well is completely silent now. The shallow water where he threw me has cleared, washing away the mud, the lace, and the old blood.

The sea did not wash my accusations clean — it brought them to light.

Because I stayed.

Because through the romance, the gaslighting, the black notebook, the silk, and the staged sea...

I stayed.

Footnotes

Halah Fatmi_____Superlative Literary journal— Finalist

_____National Poetry Contest-Top 100 of

_____Writory — Leaderboard-36th,

THE BLACK ROSE

HALAH FATMI

Everything seemed perfect, a small portion left imperfect.